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Senators collaborate on spy thriller

WASHINGTON (AP) — A U.S. senator travels to Miami and Amsterdam on secret missions designed to unravel connections between the assassination of John F. Kennedy, organized crime and a renegade terrorist squad inside the walls of the Kremlin.

He investigates the mysterious death of an aging Mafia chieftain and later meets with an internationally known assassin.

Truth or fiction?

The answer begins at 3 a.m. on a pre-dawn morning in July, 1980, when real-life Senators Gary Hart and William Cohen found themselves drinking coffee in the Senate Dining Room, bored and exhausted during an all-night filibuster on an issue both have forgotten.

Mr. Cohen: "I said to Gary, 'If you were not a senator right now, what would you rather be doing?'"

Mr. Hart: "I'd rather be in Ireland writing a novel."

Mr. Cohen: "You can't go to Ireland, so why don't we write a novel?"

And so "The Double Man" was born on the back of a large U.S. Senate manila envelope.

Over the next hour, Mr. Hart, a Democrat from Colorado, and Mr. Cohen, a Republican from Maine, crafted a spellbinding story sending the hero, Thomas Chandler, through a byzantine maze of super-power politics and murderous intelligence operations.

Mr. Hart and Mr. Cohen, who have both been members of the Senate Intelligence Committee, finished the story outline all the way to a surprise ending that catches the reader off guard, and opens the question of whether to expect a sequel. They say not.

During the four years following that July meeting in the Senate Dining Room, the project intermittently flared to life, especially in 1981 and 1982 when most of the writing was done. But there were interruptions: each ran for re-election and Mr. Hart sought the presidency.

Mr. Hart and Mr. Cohen, who has published one book of poetry and has another in the works, say that when they had the time to work on the book, the writing went smoothly, with no significant conflicts.

And the publisher, William Morrow and Company, remained interested.

Not until late last year was the final twist of plot complete, and it turns out that there is as much truth as fiction in the book.

In the summer of 1975, Mr. Hart was pursuing links between the Mafia, Fidel Castro's Cuba, and the

assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Returning through Amsterdam from a trip to Moscow, Mr. Hart secretly arranged with then-CIA Director William Colby to meet with a hired assassin code-named, QJWIN, to develop leads on the Kennedy killing.

Mr. Hart's description of the attempted meeting closely parallels the same episode in "The Double Man," except in the fictional version the meeting actually takes place.

"He [QJWIN] was living in Europe at the time," Mr. Hart said. "Colby sent over a high level operative who made contact with him and we got him from the country he was living in Europe."

Unfortunately, the professional assassin got cold feet.

"There were a whole series of mysterious events, and he bolted," said Mr. Hart. "I showed up at the bar where we were supposed to meet between 12 and 1 in the morning. And he had left."

In the end, Mr. Hart said, the assassin found out that Mr. Hart was involved in investigations of the CIA and decided to flee Amsterdam an hour before the scheduled clandestine meeting with the senator.

Then, there was Mr. Hart's solo trip to Miami in 1973 to investigate the deaths of Mafia figures Johnny Roselli and Sam Giancana. Mr. Roselli had testified before the special Senate committee to investigate CIA abuses in the 1960s, while Mr. Hart was a member of the panel. Like a Mafioso figure in the book, Mr. Roselli disappeared suddenly and his body was found stuffed into a 55-gallon oil drum found floating off Florida.

The deaths of Mr. Roselli and Mr. Giancana were mysterious, said Mr. Hart, because at the time Mr. Roselli had retired and there

was no apparent motive for his death beyond his testimony before the Senate committee.

"I went to Miami," recalled Mr. Hart. "It was when Roselli was killed. I talked to the Miami Police Department."

Mr. Hart tried to keep the trip quiet and recalls that he probably traveled under a pseudonym. "I was there less than an hour when I got a call from a reporter asking why I was there," he said with a laugh.

In the book, the hero also goes to Miami where he uncovers evidence that the Soviet spy agency, the KGB, is competing with the Mafia by selling narcotics in the United States to raise money for terrorist acts.

Mr. Hart also tried unsuccessfully to arrange a trip to Havana for a secret meeting with Cuban President Fidel Castro. After several meetings with the Cuban delegate to the United Nations, the effort collapsed because the State Department declined to cooperate.

Neither author has illusions about the serious literary merit of their book. Nor are there plans for a movie or television production.

"It's just a hell of a good story," says Mr. Hart. "We were conducting an experiment to see whether two elected officials could collaborate on a work of fiction when neither one of them had ever done it before."

And when Mr. Cohen is asked if there is a moral to the novel, he recalls that the book opens with a bomb attack by the KGB on an American secretary of state's limousine on a tree-lined picturesque route through Washington called Rock Creek parkway. The secretary's wife is killed instead.

So the moral, Mr. Cohen says with a chuckle, is, "Stay off Rock Creek Parkway."